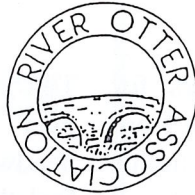


RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS



COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2003

RETURNING THE SALMON RUN TO THE RIVER OTTER



At our last AGM Simon Evans of the West Country Rivers Trust gave a talk on a project to enhance salmon stocks in our rivers by rearing salmon eggs in specifically designed egg boxes. Eggs were stripped from hen fish, fertilised by milt from the cock fish and then placed in the eggboxes to hatch and plant out in the river. The committee felt we should investigate the possibilities of such a project for our river. As a result John Palmer and Alan Knights had a further meeting with WCRT and were taken to see an existing scheme that had been running for three years on the R Fowey. We were impressed with the simplicity of the technology and felt it was worth trying to enhance our meagre salmon stocks in the river to a sustainable population. There were many hurdles to overcome. We needed a box: we needed a suitable site: above all we needed some eggs. We did have a bequest of £1000 from Gilbert Barratt which the committee dedicated to this project. Over a period of three months we overcame the hurdles one by one. We begged the loan of a box from WCRT. An ideal site was found in our headwaters. Above all the River Exe Assn generously agreed to donate an initial supply of eggs. On 7 January 2003 the eggs were installed in our box and we were up and running. The picture shows installation of the box in November. There are two sources of supply feeding running water through a spreader into the eggs. See inside for further details and the back page for more pictures.

MORE ON EGG BOXES

We are very grateful to Desmond Divers for hosting our egg box in the headwaters. The front page picture shows Desmond with Alan Knights and Graham Brooks who helped set up the box.

The box is located on the bank of the river with two sources of water supply. One is taken from the main river from a pipe 100m upstream to give an adequate flow. The other is from a spring fed leat about 15 ft above the box. Two supply lines were chosen as an insurance which paid off on our first night when the main river tap froze with the night temp down to -6. The water flows into the base of the box into a spreader which is merely a metal pipe with perforations allowing water to distribute evenly. The water then goes through a perforated plate above which is 6ins of coarse gravel. The eggs are allowed to sink into the spaces in the gravel and water rises in the box to an exit point with a plastic pipe directing the overflow into a collecting trough through which, hopefully, hatching alevins will emerge.

The eggs were stripped from a hen fish from the river Exe on 26 November. They were fertilised from a cock fish and placed in trays of running water. In about 275 temp days (water temp deg C x number of days) the eggs become eyed ova and at this stage can be moved. We collected at 330 temp days. Hatching should commence at about 750 temp days.

We must not expect miracles. There will be a steep learning curve as we build up experience. Disappointments are inevitable but we have taken every care to succeed with our precious supply of eggs. We have been much helped by advice from Simon Evans of WCRT who has been to inspect our installation and says we have done all we can to ensure a successful outcome. As you will see from the spawning run report there are a few wild fish in the river but below a viable population. Our work on the egg box is to restore nature's purpose for the potential diversity of migratory and resident fish for our river.

At this stage we shall concentrate on planting our fry out in the headwaters of the main river and the associated sidestreams. This we hope will give us the best chance of keeping above the influx of polluting discharges in the lower reaches and encourage any returning fish to move up.

OTHER WORK IN 2002

The major task for 2002 was to improve access over Tipton Weir for fish moving up to the headwaters and upper sidestreams to spawn. We feel that successful spawning is vital to recovery of our river.

On 1 October Rob Jones and Andy Locke of the EA joined Alan Knights on a two day project to rebuild the route on the RH bank and build a new route on the LH side of the weir. Axminster Excavators provided the muscle and indeed a wealth of experience developed from other similar work on the river. We used four 15 ton loads of blockstone and much was achieved in two days.

The RH route is very good and many fish got over this path. The new LH route was popular with the fish but there was difficulty in jumping over the sill from the top pool. We need to raise the top pool just a little and we shall be looking at this in 2003.

ROA paid for the blockstone and EA for the machinery and operator. Our share was £1800. Thank you Rob and Andy for all your efforts and to John Sargent for allowing us access over his field.

THE SPAWNING RUN 2002

Our observations this year were concentrated on Tipton Weir following on improvements referred to above. Prior to October the river had been so low that there had been very little movement. Sea trout had collected in the holding pools at Tipton and below waiting for a spate. With the spates from mid October onwards there was an explosion of activity. In a total of 15 hrs observation over 8 weeks a total of 261 attempts were seen at Tipton Weir with 53 seen to succeed. There were a number of splendid fish of 10lb+ as well as plenty in 3 - 5lb range. Some were identified as salmon and all seemed to be in excellent condition with a number bright silver straight from the sea.

Once the rain started it never stopped with the highest Oct-Dec rainfall we have recorded. What then happened to our migrating fish is a mystery. We know some passed through mid river weirs but they never appeared at the very top. Did you see any spawning activity?

MIKE BROWNS BEQUEST

Mike is a long time member and former committee member and treasurer of the association. He has been in poor health and with impaired sight does not see that he will be able to pursue his love of fishing the river. Very generously he has given the whole of his tackle and fly tying equipment to be sold for the benefit of the associations work on the river.

Those who knew Mike would expect all his tackle to be of the highest standard and maintained in pristine condition and indeed it is. There are superb quality rods and reels. The fly tying materials include top quality Metz and Hoffman hackles. There is a wooden fitted box together with all fly tying tools. The whole will be available for sale at the AGM and sensible offers befitting the quality of the collection will be invited. A list of items is enclosed with the documents accompanying this newsletter.

WILDLIFE

On Christmas Eve I walked down the river in mild overcast conditions. I saw an otter working his way upstream searching the water along the left hand bank. I watched him for some ten minutes until he found an eel in pool some 30m away from where I was standing. Having eaten his catch he passed back downstream right in front of me. As I watched a young kingfisher flew down the river.

This I believe sums up the state of our wildlife.

Hérons have prospered, white egrets are now a regular part of the river scene, dippers are not quite so numerous but are still there, buzzards are in larger numbers than for some years and most other bankside birds abound.

There were two possible sightings of a water vole. The reports were not positively confirmed but were from a reliable source and in a situation where voles were present in past years before they became so scarce. Otters have now taken residence along the river and few territories are vacant. A few fieldfare turned up this winter. Swallows and martins arrived at the usual nesting sites in profusion although loss of bankside habitat left sand martins without a home.

All in all an encouraging season.

RAINFALL

Our rainfall pattern has always been unpredictable. We view the figures on a seasonal year i.e. from 1 October to the following 30 September. This gives one whole winter followed by a whole summer. On this basis both summer and winter were below long term average rainfall. The figures were :-

	mm
• Winter (Oct-Mar)	594
• Summer (Apr-Sept)	397
• TOTAL YEAR	991

The summer was particularly dry (prev yr 367) and had a marked effect on migratory fish patterns with no spates to enable them to move upstream. On the whole river flows were maintained at minimum levels but the lower reaches suffered most with GW abstraction below OSM and the increased treatment works discharges following residential expansion in OSM. These discharges rely on old consent levels designed for higher river flows and a smaller population and they are urgently in need of review.

Winter 02/03 has started with heavy continuous rain and floods. In the first 3 months of the winter there were 636mm of rain, more than the total winter rainfall of last year. Reservoirs must be full to overflowing and our summer water supplies should be assured.

POLLUTION

There have been one or two minor incidents which have been dealt with by the Environment Agency. Feniton stw had a failure in equipment which should have raised automatic alarms at HQ. Disturbingly automatic warnings failed to operate and it took a report of evident pollution to bring a response which was swiftly attended by EA. We continue to have concern at Churchinford where pollution is running off a farm situation in wet conditions. There is also danger from a farm buildings redevelopment on the banks of the Churchinford Stream. Our concern here is the need for special care above our egg box project. Our pollution officer Derek Carter is closely watching this situation and has been in attendance collecting evidence. We are also concerned about the Metcombe Brook which we are monitoring.

THE SEASON

The dominant factor in this years season was lack of rainfall and low river flows. Early season fly hatches were fair with the usual modest hatches of mayfly. In the upper river reported sport was good with the usual number of 2lb+ trout from the Deer Park water. At Cottarson the size range of fish was good with growing numbers of 12 oz fish in the total. We believe this improvement reflects last years work on Langford Weir allowing spawning fish to get upstream and return as mature fish. With low fishing pressure we were pleased with our 50 superb wild river Otter brownies. We were not so pleased with rainbow trout turning up in the middle river. These must be escapees from trout farms and we hope it was an isolated problem.

Lower river seems to continue to have problems. Having said that total catches remain at average levels but fly hatches and rising fish are not as evident as in the past. The section of the river is largely reliant on stocked fish of mature size and the catch reflects this. Elsewhere we comment on poor quality discharge consents and the rising population of OSM and we feel these conditions are affecting the ecology of the lower river.

We have had two reports of catches believed to be salmon parr. These reports are from very experienced rods and have to be taken seriously. We do need to know of any such catches or sightings as they may become more likely with our egg box project. One thing to look for on salmon parr is only one or two spots on the gill covers.

SEA TROUT

Without doubt we had one of the largest runs of sea trout our river has experienced in recent years. Fish came into the lower tidal reaches very early and some catches were reported. Then it turned very dry and the fish seemed to return to sea. With no real spates in July August and September few fish were reported. Then in October the rains came and sea trout flooded back into the river. Holding pools at Tipton became full of fish from ¾ lb up to 10lb+. One rod fishing this section had 40 fish up to 5lb and

hooked one fish so large that he was unable to bring it to the net. A very experienced rod he estimated the fish to be in excess of 10lb and probably a salmon.

Watchers at Tipton Weir saw shoals of sea trout seeking to move upstream from ¾ lb to 10 lb+. Some were quite dark but a proportion were bright silver straight from the sea.

We are of course not used to fishing after 30 September and so most rods failed to take advantage of this bonanza. We believe there were probably 500 sea trout in the river at the end of the season.

Our fish have traditionally run late with only limited migration possible before Otterton Weir fish pass. Gradually they should acclimatise to the new conditions and move up to the middle reaches in Jul/Aug.

NEWS FROM S W R A

The South West Rivers Association continues to be a very effective organisation representing all the rivers in the SW region. Representations are made on all consultation papers affecting our rivers and much has been done on an International level on salmon migration and net catches.

One important current project is the **Devon Fisheries Action Plan**. We are working on this with the EA but the plan is part of a national initiative. The **DFAP** will be chaired by our own nominee and co-ordinate the existing work of individual river organisations such as ROA.

It will not be just a talking shop but an effective executive representing our fishery plans to the Agency and planning allocation of resources. We look at this together with the scientific resource of West Country Rivers Trust as being an effective vehicle to manage our rivers. We have to recognise that the EA is being given rapidly disappearing resources to carry our river management and we have to be ready to fill the vacuum should it arise.

Although we have never actually set out a written plan for our river the committee have acted with clear ultimate objectives. We have firstly worked on water quality and volume. We then tackled spawning barriers and now we have the egg box project.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

What an excellent year it has been. Fish have been caught over 2 lbs and during the spawning run fish over 10 lbs have been seen. It is starting to show all the hard work put into the river is coming to fruition. If you have healthier fish then you have a cleaner river that surely is a benefit to all the wildlife.

One of the big improvements this year has been the work done at Tipton Weir. It is still not quite right and a little more work needs to be done to make it complete, but soon fish will be able to get up the weir with ease. Our thanks to John Sargent who allowed us to do the work.

One of the most exciting events is the installation of an egg box. At last years AGM Simon Evans of the West Country Rivers Trust gave us a presentation on the egg box project. The committee decided that if the opportunity arose we would try and install one on the river. As you will read elsewhere in the newsletter it all came together and we now have an egg box in place. Hopefully by the AGM they will all have hatched. Thanks should go to our secretary for securing the box, the WCRT for the loan of the box and the River Exe and Tributaries Assn for the eggs. Special thanks to Desmond Divers for providing the site and daily monitoring. Also our thanks to the late Gilbert Barratt whose bequest we have used to fund the project. I think he would be very pleased to see how his money was spent.

I mention this every year but I think more than ever we have to stand up with other field sports against the Government. Here is a quote from Hugo Swire one of your local MPs who is on the standing committee of the Hunting Bill "any sportsman who thinks their sport is safe from those who are currently seeking to ban hunting with dogs is living in a dream land. It seems quite obvious to me, sitting on the Standing Committee of the Hunting Bill which I do, that the same people who are so set against hunting would soon turn against shooting and fishing if successful." I do not believe that campaigning organisations such as the League Against Cruel Sports or IFAW having picked off one sport will leave the others alone.

Finally I would just like to thank Alan Knights for all the hard work he does on behalf of the ROA and also like to thank the rest of the committee for their work and support. Remember we are still looking for a President so if any of you know of anyone who would fit the bill please let us know.

RICHARD J T MARKER

AUCTION OF FISHING DAYS TO TAKE PLACE AFTER THE AGM ON 19 MARCH 2003

LOT	LOCATION	FISHING	SUGGESTED MIN BID
			£
1	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	15
2	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	10
3	COMBE ESTATE WATER	ONE DAY - BELOW WESTON BRIDGE	10
4	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE PRIME UPPER BEAT	10
5	DEER PARK	A DAY ON DEER PARK WATER	15
6	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	10
7	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	10
8	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE LOWER BEAT	10
9	RIVER TALE	A DAY ON ESCOT WATER	10
10	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	15
11	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	10

Auction will take place after the AGM. Postal bids may be made if you are unable to attend the AGM and should be sent to Alan Knights Cottarson Farm Awliscombe Honiton EX14 3NR. Successful bidders will be put in touch with riparian owners to make arrangements for their fishing.

AGM ON 19 MARCH - REPORT ON EGG BOX PROJECT - FISHING TACKLE SALE
Alan Bruford will make a presentation on the work on the R.Tale

FROM DAVE BROGEN - ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

There have been considerable changes in the Environment Agency since the last Newsletter. I had the pleasure of discussing these at a meeting in October with representatives of the Otter Association.

The BRITE (Better Regulation In The Environment) process and structures, were introduced in October. As a result this now means I have taken over the responsibility for fisheries on the river Otter and Axe. I am looking forward to getting to grips with the issues and delivering real environmental outcomes.

Put simply the Environment Agency now has a three tier system to enable more consistency and better delivery of service. Policy is set through Head Office, the method of delivering this is provided by Process teams within "regional offices" and on the ground application is achieved through field delivery teams (called Environment Management Teams) of which I am the team leader for East Devon.

We are fortunate to retain Andy Locke, the on the ground fishery expertise with whom you are familiar. We will also draw on additional staff when required.

Looking back on the past year there have been good successes with an example being the new fish pass at Tipton St John weir that has proved highly beneficial for migrating fish. For the forthcoming year I am hopeful that additional improvements can be achieved at one of the few remaining obstructions within the catchment, namely, Marles Weir.

EROSION.

Bank erosion is a big problem in the Otter Valley. Sometimes it is triggered by fallen trees washed down the river an lodging against an obstruction causing turbulence washing against banks. Sometimes loss of bankside vegetation leaves soft silt banks exposed to attack. It is small initial areas of damage that expose a vulnerable area open to attack in the heavy spates that are a characteristic of our river.

Solutions are difficult to identify and often very expensive. Blockstone protection can protect bends where problems often start but the Agency do not favour this approach. Willow spiling is a possibility and has been tried by Devon Clinton Estates at Colaton Raleigh. It looks promising but can be expensive and needs maintenance to avoid rapidly growing trees. Furthermore we do not want vast areas of bank covered with willow.

WCRT favour bankside protection to limit cattle access but this has problems with a river prone to flood. WCRT have agreed to extend the work they have done on the Tale to the main river. We commend co-operation with WCRT to see what can be done.

COMMUNICATION

The committee rely on information from members on all matters relating to the river. For our plans to be effective we need to know the collective experience of those who live by, walk along or fish the river. In the past we had two wardens from NRA/EA and their predecessors who regularly patrolled the banks. With very limited government resources this is no longer the case. Thus causes of concern may go unnoticed or unreported for years.

We must now take on the responsibility as the eyes and ears of the river. We need to know :-

- Evidence of pollution
- Sightings of fly hatches
- Unusual wildlife patterns
- Individual wildlife sightings
- Details of fish catches (good or bad)
- Sightings of spawning (very important)
- Salmon & sea trout holding areas
- Signs of serious poaching
- Impact of cormorant predation

This list is not exhaustive but gives ideas on what we need to know. Please **communicate**.



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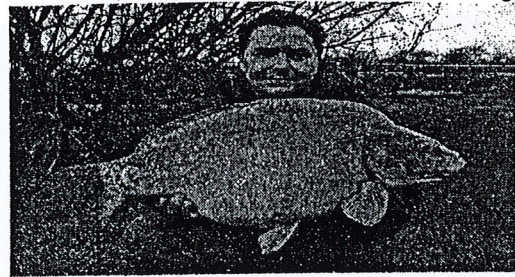
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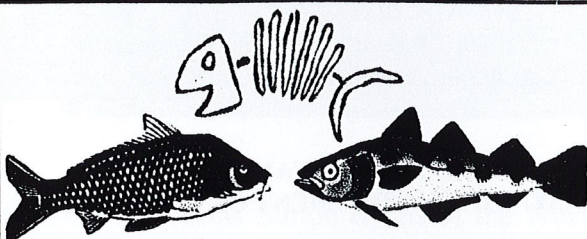
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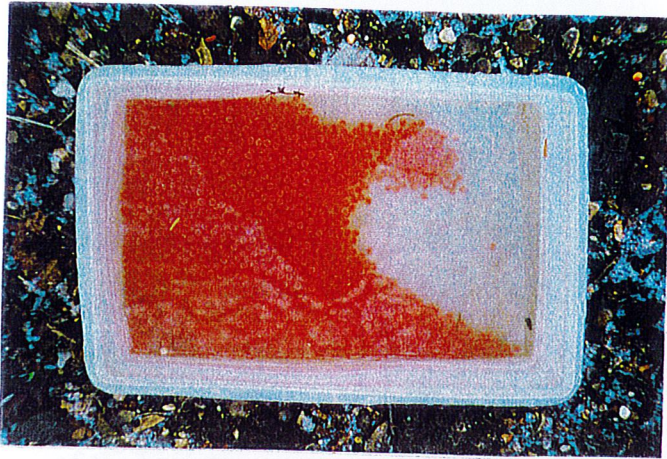
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**PLANTING OUT OVA
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**DESMOND DIVERS & ALAN KNIGHTS
SPREADING OUT EGGS**



**WITH SIMON EVANS WCRT
A SCIENTIFIC ASSESSMENT OF OUR WORK**



**OCTOBER 2002 - TIPTON WEIR
THE IMPROVED RH "PASS"**



**TIPTON WEIR - OCTOBER 2002
THE NEW LH ROUTE**